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ABSTRACT

The Asolo State Theatre Company and Florida State University, operating together, provide a professional repertory theatre company, professional theatre training, a laboratory for theatre-related research, and a resource both for innovative teaching in the public schools and for undergraduate training in the humanities. Begun in 1960, this operation has grown from a summer student company to a year-round professional theatre company plus 19 full-time faculty members in the School of Theatre in 1974. Since the Asolo was designated the State Theatre of Florida in 1965, the state, the university, and the community have shared in the necessary financial subsidy, with additional support coming from the National Endowment for the Arts and other agencies. This is a highly successful operation which can serve as an example for the establishment of other similar theatre programs. (JM)

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THE ADMINISTRATION AND OPERATION OF A YEAR-ROUND PROFESSIONAL, RESIDENT REPERTORY THEATRE COMPANY AS A DIVISION OF A UNIVERSITY THEATRE PROGRAM

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It is the intent of this paper to offer as complete as possible the administration and operation of THE ASOLO STATE THEATRE COMPANY. It is the position of this paper that the approach of THE ASOLO STATE THEATRE COMPANY and the State University System through Florida State University provides the maximum potential for an economically sound, artistically free and excellent professional repertory theatre company, and an artistically and educationally sound method of professional theatre training. In addition, the company provides the university with a laboratory for meaningful research into the many problems confronting the profession, the business and the educational training centers; a resource for innovative undergraduate training in the humanities; a resource for state-wide development of interest and knowledge in the art of theatre; and a resource for innovative teaching in public schools of the state grades K through fourteen. At least, the Asolo has survived since 1960 and grown and, most importantly in this day and age, looks forward with healthy optimism toward solving its problems and fulfilling its goals. Perhaps a brief look at Dr. Larry Klar's work in his study, Affiliations Between Selected Universities and Professional Theatre Companies, completed in 1970, will offer a basis of comparison. Copies of this work plus all relevant documents concerning Asolo and Florida State University are available for you to read in detail at your leisure and to take with you in most cases. I am also pleased that Dr. Klar is here to answer questions and enter into the discussion which will follow. During the discussion period, I will also introduce you to representatives of the Florida Board of Regents and the President and members of the Asolo Theatre Festival Association, the community leaders who support and make

possible the continuance of Asolo, as you may have questions for them and they may be able to add to your understanding of the Asolo's operation.

It was the summer of 1960 that began what was to become the Asolo State Theatre Company. Two Florida State University professors, myself, and Dr. Arthur Dorlag, "discovered" the beautiful, 18th century Italian theatre brought over from Italy by Chick Austin, the first director of the Ringling Museum after it had been given to the State of Florida by John Ringling. This unique state-owned jewel-box of a theatre was used as a museum piece and to show movies. With the cooperation of Kenny Donahue, who was then director of the Ringling Museums, a contract was made with the Attorney General's Office whereby Florida State would use the theatre rent-free in the summer of 1960 to produce five 18th Century and Restoration comedies for twenty-five performances. These comedies were performed by a student company using the authentic wing and back shutter staging undoubtedly employed in the theatre in Italy when Eleonora Duse appeared there at the turn of the century. By 1962, the company had lost $15,000.00 and the university threatened to withdraw its support as it had assumed fiscal responsibility. It is important to note that the theatre began without soliciting community support. This was a grave error; however, community support did begin when the Asolo Theatre Festival Association was formed in 1961 by a small group of Sarasota citizens. This community group could not cope with the deficit. I became Managing Director in 1963 and slowly the repertoire broadened and the staging changed as well. By 1965 we were out of debt and were paying "semi-professional" actors to head the company. In that year, we became the official "State Theatre of Florida" by legislative

act. This was done in the hope that state appropriations might accrue to the Asolo. The association of citizens had grown larger, although the university remained responsible for fiscal affairs. In the Fall of 1966, the Asolo received an HEW Grant to tour the ninth and twelfth grades of the state. This was an innovative proposal whereby the English teachers working with the Asolo staff would select a play which the students would read in their English classes. We would supply a curriculum guide and in-service training for the teachers. The company would tour to the individual county with the play and the students would be bussed to the theatre selected. There, in the morning, the professional company would illustrate the language and symbols of the theatre to prepare the students to see the play which was presented after lunch. Then, a member of the professional company met with the students in class to discuss the play they had seen and read. Due to this grant, the fiscally sound Asolo became a year-round, Equity company, and we increased our resident season to February through September.

I must add that prior to 1966, all sets and costumes were constructed at Florida State University and trucked 300 miles to the Asolo for the summer plays. There were no shops of any kind, no box office, poor lighting and sound equipment. To convert to a year-round operation, ninety days were all that were available to acquire shop space for scenery and costume construction. Shops were fully equipped and a full staff of technicians were employed to run a rotating repertory company presenting ten plays, two going on the road throughout the state. A LORT contract was negotiated and the Asolo became a year-round, rotating repertory company of eighteen Equity actors. Obviously, two years had gone into the planning of the year-round operation, but final approval

to proceed with contracts and arrangements did not leave more than ninety days. In that time, Florida State University moved from a budget of $65,000.00 to $450,000.00. Whereas the community group, the Asolo Association, had grown in size and support, its support was minimal, and again no community investment was obtained to begin the larger operation. Also, there was no capital investment to be written off over a period of years but the hope that with the grant and a small investment by the university the budget might be met without deficit. Needless to say, Asolo lost its fiscal soundness and by something of a miracle lived to regain it. I will return to the complete fiscal picture in a moment. So much for the developmental years as this paper is not a history of the theatre company. It might be encouraging to schools with relatively small theatre departments to note that in 1967 the fifth faculty member was added to the Theatre Division of the Speech Department which had developed the Asolo since 1960. In 1974, the Asolo is part of a School of Theatre with nineteen full-time faculty.

Now that we have the Asolo State Theatre existing as a year-round, professional company administered by a university, there are many areas that need to be examined. First, perhaps, why should a university invest time, money and personnel in such a theatre? What are its purposes and functions?

Here at Florida State, the Asolo serves well the three basic functions of the university: teaching, research, and service. In 1960, there were two professional theatres operating short seasons in the State of Florida, and an occasional touring company. In 1960, there was no certification in theatre in public schools of the state, and training and exposure was minimal and poor. In 1960, there was virtually no standard of professional theatre art available to theatre students, not to mention the citizens of the state. In 1960, there was no reper-

tory company in the Southeast. The Asolo was developed to perform these services for the state. In 1974, there is certification in theatre in the Florida public schools; there are many professional theatres as well as community theatres which are producing high quality work in the state, and the Asolo presents a varied program to thousands of people who come to Sarasota and thousands and thousands of people on our tour throughout the state. I am most pleased that the school program, begun under the HEW grant, has continued after the grant ceased in the second year. The program has been increased and improved, and the young people are still seeing the plays and having the entire educational program without cost to them as part of their curricular program. I cannot think of many other things which the university does which truly aligns the university with state-wide community support in providing a service that stimulates business, education and community enrichment.

The Asolo has provided a laboratory and resource for practical and valuable research projects undertaken by the university. Social Science Research Institute, Communications, School of Business, and Psychology Departments are some which have conducted research at the Asolo. The School of Theatre has developed an unique Theatre Science Division under Dr. Gil Lazier which will use the Asolo to service the professional theatre and education with experimental, quantitative behavioral research into persistent problems (such as audience analysis, aesthetic development).

In teaching, the Asolo serves the university primarily as an on-going hospital serves the medical school. The entire professional training program is built around this resource. In the three year Master of Fine Arts program

in acting, a student studies at the Asolo all that period and must intern at the Asolo for one year before he gets a degree. He must work with a one-to-one relationship with a member of the professional company. He is paid as much as a journeyman Equity actor and works directly with the company as actor, designer, director, etc. The "core" MFA program, which is available for you to look at, provides opportunity for the student to devote full time to this apprenticeship training. He obtains basic skills and instruction on campus in Tallahassee for all but acting, and then must "put it together" under professional conditions and standards three hundred miles away at the Asolo. The faculty and staff from Asolo see each MFA student's work once each quarter and evaluate him and vote on his continuing in the program. Asolo faculty spend one quarter a year visiting on campus to teach while many Tallahassee faculty work at Asolo summers, as do many students. Thus, there is continuity of instruction and a feeling among students and faculty that the Asolo is part of the School facility and program. Most important, our MFA students have a standard to meet, and those graduating simply are of a quality that would be employed in the Asolo company. The reputation of the Asolo artistic work is one with the student product. Although I am sure you will have many questions and will want to read detailed materials available, in short, the Asolo is integrated into the graduate, research, and undergraduate programs of the School.

I mentioned "undergraduate" program. The Asolo is used by the humanities courses. Over sixty students each summer study at Asolo in what is essentially an introduction or appreciation of theatre courses. New College in Sarasota contracts with Florida State University to teach its undergraduates theatre

at the Asolo. A course in "repertory theatre" is offered and includes a prolonged stay at the Asolo.

Thus, to serve its functions, the Asolo must first be the finest quality professional theatre company possible. It must produce theatre of all styles and periods which would be meaningful to today's audience and produce them artistically so that they do have such meaning. It must also produce the work of new writers and new work by established writers. This season alone we are producing FOUR new works by young American playwrights as part of our regular season. Then, this professional company of quality must be the training ground for future professionals and extend itself into the development of young audiences in public school touring. Finally, it must place some of its emphasis upon research for the future as a laboratory. Theatre, as a business and a profession, has only the university to advance its aesthetic product and its business and educational methods. These then are the functions of the Asolo.

Since it can be proved that this professional company truly serves the function of the university (teaching, research and service), the university should provide staff and faculty. On this basis, Florida State University provides five and one half full-time faculty to the company. Their functions range from management to artistic direction to design. These faculty direct the MFA students who work with the Asolo and do teach on campus periodically. This might be the best place to explain the management and staff functions.

In 1968, after two years of operation as a year-round Equity company with a loss of almost $200,000.00, Florida State University decided it could

no longer assume financial responsibility for the Asolo. If it could continue, the university would continue to support the educational function of the theatre. Therefore, I was faced with forming a non-profit corporation which would assume fiscal responsibility, sign all contracts, etc. With the help of a few friends, I formed Asolo State Theatre, Inc., and sought funds to keep the theatre going. At this point, the community rallied and literally saved the Asolo. Under the leadership of Adolph Frankel, the business community responded with a committee, and Mr. Frankel did a phenomenal job throughout the state in building contributors who averaged $20.00 each and number now close to the two thousand mark. So from this relatively small community, $60,000.00 was raised, and my friends who signed on with me in Asolo State Theatre, Inc., could meet the financial obligations of the theatre. So,I have described to you the Asolo Theatre Festival Association, the community based group which now raises about $90,000.00 annually, and Asolo State Theatre, Inc., which is a corporation to take fiscal responsibility for the theatre. NEITHER OF THESE GROUPS HAS ANY SAY IN THE ARTISTIC OR EDUCATIONAL POLICY OF THE THEATRE.

To further understand the organization, you remember that I said that the Asolo was designated The State Theatre of Florida in 1965. When the university withdrew fiscal responsibility, I had the legislation revised and the State Theatre was placed under the Secretary of State's office in the newly formed Division of Cultural Affairs. This made the State Theatre an agency which could request legislative funds through the Secretary of State. It also gave the theatre a cabinet official to influence legislative support. This happened three years ago and has resulted in $103,000.00 appropriated last year

by the legislature. A copy of the Bill is available to you for your close examination. The Board of Trustees of the State Theatre of Florida are named by position in the law and not appointed. The Dean of the School of Theatre at Florida State University, the Director of the Asolo, a member of the Board of Trustees of the Ringling Museums (also under the Secretary of State), and one appointed by the Board from the community, usually the President of the Asolo Theatre Association, make up the Board of Trustees. Thus, from this Board, control rests with the university and with those who founded the theatre. THIS IS THE ONLY POLICY MAKING BOARD GOVERNING THE THEATRE. I am Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the State Theatre, Executive Director of the Asolo (Howard Millman sits on the Board of Trustees as Managing Director), and Dean of the School of Theatre. Thus, this relates all of the necessary policy groups of the Asolo.

To summarize: The Asolo Theatre Festival Association (The Asolo Angels), a community group founded in Sarasota but comprised of members from throughout the State, pledged to financially support the Asolo. The Asolo State Theatre, Inc., a corporation now comprised of Sarasota businessmen, accepts fiscal responsibility for the Asolo and permits the theatre to operate outside of stringent state purchasing procedures. For example, the corporation can negotiate with Equity, a union, and borrow money, etc. The State Theatre Board of Trustees has policy control over the artistic and educational program and contracts with Asolo State Theatre, Inc., to provide the company and necessary resources to produce a season. Thus, by legal agreement, the state

is not fiscally responsible and all monies which are received do not go into the state treasury. However, the Board of Trustees can and does request a budget from the legislature which the Board can turn over to the corporation to carry out a specified aspect of the program. This was done last year with the $103,000.00 appropriation by the legislature.

Let me show how the financial support is spread out to make a broad base which should offer continuity and opportunity for growth. The Ringling Museums provide the theatre, rent free, although guards are paid. Florida State University provides about $82,000.00 in salary money for five and one-half faculty, thus providing administrative and artistic direction without placing a drain on the budget of the theatre. The community can provide about $60,000.00 in support and the legislature is being asked for $121,000.00 this year. Thus, university, community, and state can share in providing the necessary financial subsidy without over-taxing their means. With this support and that of the National Endowment and other supporting agencies, the theatre can operate as TWO COMPANIES, one to tour the state year-round providing services to the public schools, community and professional theatres, with the second professional company in residence to serve as the laboratory and training ground, as well as to develop artistic excellence. A third experimental company will be added to deal only in contemporary and new plays. This will require increased facilities here in Sarasota which are now being acquired. Already, under Moses Goldberg, a full children's theatre program has been operating both here in Sarasota, as part of the Asolo regular season, and on tour from September through January to the elementary grades of the

state. These companies are currently staffed by MFA students on assistantships, but plans call for this to be professional with apprentice students in the manner of the Asolo. For example, the premiere of Aurand Harris's play Just So Stories is currently playing at the Asolo this weekend as part of its state-wide tour. I would like to stress that faculty and staff connected with the total Asolo programs are artists of stature who must submit to professional evaluation by national theatre critics. In no case is the Asolo satisfied with second-class citizenship as a professional artistic company, but, in fact, for its own development, evaluation on the strictest professional bases. Granted that the Asolo is an Equity, LORT "C" company which imposes salary limitation existing in any other theatre of its size. On this basis, it should be judged and evaluated as any other similar LORT theatre. This, indeed, is true of any university based professional company.

On the basis of the Asolo experiment, I would like to suggest the validity of a professional, repertory theatre attached to a university (universities) theatre curricular program and artistically and educationally run by the professional-educators who are responsible for the training of the professional-career oriented students. This company should be supported financially in part by this university and by community support, and as a "state theatre" by state funds. The hope for the future seems to me to be basically in these areas of support which should continue and grow rather than be subject to the whim of a funding agency or a few individuals who supply fiscal support.

In the immediate future, plans are underway to bring the entire university system of the state into the Asolo training program. Thus, it would serve as

the internship for those students trained in any university of the state capable of producing the qualified candidates according to the standards set by the Asolo faculty and staff. They would then receive their degrees from that university. With additional support, it is hoped that all actors would become faculty, at least in method of payment, thus relieving the theatre budget. They would be signed to a special Equity contract.

Certainly negotiations need to be conducted with Equity to arrive at a suitable contract for University-based repertory companies. Nevertheless, I feel that university-based repertory theatres should use Equity in order to obtain the best available talent.

I see as a most important function of universities the establishment of markets for their professional graduates. We must have a viable profession which we serve if we are to maintain any validity as a graduate program. By this system of professional companies, we are providing possible imployment as well as training actors, directors, designers, etc., who are capable of contributing to the singular demands of repertory work. We can thus (and this day is not far off, in my mind) provide the talent for the regional repertory theatre movement in this country and be an active vital part in its advancement through research, and development through financial support. By having such a theatre, which must take its place in professional, artistic evaluation on the national scene, we have a base for proving the validity of our professional training as our product will be judged by the standards set by this company. For the first time, there will be a real basis for judging the quality of talent and training.

By examining Larry Klar's study, AFFILIATIONS BETWEEN SELECTED UNIVERSITIES AND PROFESSIONAL THEATRE COMPANIES, we may see

other methods of uniting the professional and university theatres. We may also see some of the problems, other than the financial, which plague these operations. For example, Asolo has a distinct advantage in having its professional operation three hundred miles away from the central campus. For one thing, there is no vying for the same space. There is integration of faculty and yet there is a marked reduction in petty rivalries between those in the "professional" program and those not. By requiring every university professor of acting or directing to be professionally qualified to work at Asolo, an inter-change is possible, and money can be saved on visiting directors, designers, etc. Students (other than acting), by staying on campus for a portion of their training, get the advantage of maximum, varied experiences and training with facilities not available in Sarasota. They respect and feel part of the entire School program. Finally, a policy which places the School into a total program which incorporates the professional division helps to reduce factionalism. Problems of communications over the three hundred mile gulf still remain, and travel money must be available to bring the entire faculty together frequently. Also, some method of communications needs to be found to keep all aware of the developing program.

I will not take the time here to go into the other methods employed by those universities studied by Dr. Klar. He can answer your questions, and you may wish to read his work. Meanwhile, before you are budget figures, the state theatre legislation, the MFA program and how it operates and relates to the Asolo. Also, there are statements of organization and Asolo programs with further information. In the belief that this method of university-based professional theatre training and support has merit and is worthy of consideration, I invite your questions and comments.